

Confirmed breeding record of the Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola* in Eritrea

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The Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola* breeds from April to August on islands in the northwestern Indian Ocean, where twelve known colonies are confirmed to have survived since 1970: three in Iran, two in the United Arab Emirates, one in Oman, two in Saudi Arabia along the Red Sea coast, two in Somalia (Rands 1996) and two in Sudan (Nikolaus 1989). The species is also suspected to breed in Yemen (Rands 1996), Kuwait (Cowan 1990, Wright 1995), Sri Lanka (Palmer & Briggs 1986) and Eritrea (Smith 1957, Clapham 1964, Urban & Boswall 1969). This paper confirms that Crab Plovers breed in Eritrea, at Dahret, a small island of the Dahlak Archipelago.

Dahret (15° 53' N; 39° 34' E), 34 km north of Massawa, is a 25 ha flat (c. 2 m a.s.l.) sandy coral island. Rocky outcrops emerge along the shore a few cm above the ground and the vegetation is entirely composed of grasses and herbs <50 cm tall.

The Crab Plover colony was discovered on 2 June 2001, on the southeastern coast, close to the sea. A broken fresh egg, on the soil surface amid the burrows, testified that egg laying had recently started. We visited the island four times between 2 June and 26 August 2001. On 17 July we censused the occupied nests by placing a stick at the entrance of each of 149 burrows evident in the colony. After 24 h, the birds had removed 83 sticks, 60 were left in place and 6 were dubious, leading to an estimate of 83-89 pairs. The previous evening 150 adults were seen at the colony, supporting the estimate.

On Dahret, we saw only a few Crab Plovers foraging and we saw none on the neighbouring islands of Dohul and Dohul Bahut during a boat survey on 18 July. We suspect that Crab Plovers might hunt mainly on Harat Island (c. 20 km north of Dahret) where mudflats and mangroves create a suitable habitat for crabs and mudskippers and where Clapham (1964) observed young soliciting food from adults between 21-24 August 1962. By 26 August 2001 all Crab Plovers, apart from two adults, had left Dahret.

In addition to the occupied colony, we discovered nine still discernible old colony sites around the island perimeter, <100 m inland. Dahret therefore appears to be an important traditional breeding ground for the species.

At present, this nesting site seems to be under no direct threat. In fact, no mammals or reptiles, which could prey on eggs or chicks, occur on the island. Man used to exploit Crab Plover eggs and chicks for food in the Persian Gulf (Brown *et al.* 1991, Rands 1996) but we have no evidence that this happens in the Dahlaks. Local and Yemeni fishermen sometimes collect tern eggs (Meleca 2001) and this still occurs on Dahret (pers. obs.). An indirect threat may indeed be represented by tourism, but this is limited, especially during the hottest months of the year, when Crab Plovers nest.

The world population of Crab Plovers, estimated at c. 43,000 individuals (Rose & Scott 1994), is not considered at immediate risk of global extinction (Rands 1996) and the species was not included in the Red List by Collar *et al.* (1994).

In the last century, however, colonies such as those in northern Kenya (Archer 1937), Kuwait (Cowan 1990) and Saudi Arabia (Newton & al Suhaibani 1996), have disappeared and the few known nesting sites of this bird should be secured against any direct or indirect human interference. The Dahlak Archipelago has been recommended as a national park (IUCN/UNEP 1987, 1988) but this has not yet been established. We recommend that Dahret Island is conferred appropriate protection on account of its ornithological importance.

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